

Consumer behaviour and the life course: shopper reactions to self-service grocery shops and supermarkets in England c.1947–75

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Abstract. We examine the development of self-service grocery shopping from a consumer perspective. Using qualitative data gathered through a nationwide biographical survey and oral histories, it was possible to go beyond contemporary market surveys which pay insufficient attention to shopping as a socially and culturally embedded practice. We use the conceptual framework of the life course to demonstrate how grocery shopping is a complex activity, in which the retail encounter is shaped by the specific interconnection of different retail formats and their geographies, alongside consumer characteristics and their situational influences. Consumer reactions to retail modernization must be understood in relation to the development of consumer practices at points of transition and stability within the life course. These practices are accessed by examining retrospective consumer narratives about food shopping.

Introduction

This paper explores how life-course perspectives can illuminate the processes involved in the development of food shopping practices. To address these questions we first introduce the empirical context of the paper, which examines consumer reactions to self-service grocery retailing in early postwar England c.1947–75. Second, we explore conceptualizations of the life course and relate it to theories of shopping. Third, we outline the methodology utilized in the AHRC-funded project: “Reconstructing Consumer Landscapes: Shopper Reactions to the Supermarket in Early Post-war England c.1947–1975”. Oral histories are introduced as the means of accessing the subjective practice of shopping and the self-representation of the shopping self. Fourth, we present three detailed case studies that demonstrate how food shopping, understood as a socially embedded consumption practice, can be traced through the life course to provide greater insights about consumer reactions to retail format innovation.

It has long been acknowledged that prior life experiences, including those bound up with geographical mobility, are important in shaping shopping practices. Theoretical and methodological bases for investigating consumer behaviour over the life course, however, have been slow to emerge and their importance has yet to be fully incorporated into the growing body of consumer research (Belk, 2006; Chin, 2007; Elliott and Davies, 2006; Golden et al, 1980; Mather et al, 2003; Moschis, 2007; Witkowski and Jones, 2006). Problems of cost, pressure from sponsors to deliver results quickly, and attrition make longitudinal studies difficult to carry out (Ladkin, 2004). It is not surprising, therefore, that market and academic research tends to be dominated by cross-sectional surveys that seek to categorize shopping behaviour at one point in time (Piirto, 1991; Wilkes, 1995). Research into the factors determining food choices have highlighted the significance of life-course roles and events, but have yet to address shopping behaviour. For example, Furst et al (1996) explore the value negotiations underlying decision making

and habitual practices. Bisogni et al (2005) demonstrate how food choices are connected with childhood memories and family traditions; and Devine (2005) calls for a better understanding of the contexts surrounding major turning points in food decision making. In the marketing and geographical literatures, life-course analysis of consumer behaviour has received a small amount of attention.

First, marketing research highlights the importance of the intertemporal dimension, in which consumers weigh their affective reaction to past decisions and events against the perceived probability of future success associated with specific purchases (Zauberman and Ratner, 2003). Moschis, (2007) has recently outlined the potential for research that combines this intertemporal dimension with life-course analysis, noting that it is uncommon for consumer behaviour to be examined relative to earlier stages of life. Most notably, he examines how human capital (ie resources, qualifications, skills, and knowledge) is mobilized to negotiate the construction of the self, and how these negotiations are interconnected with consumer decision making. Socialization of consumers has also received some treatment, with Moschis (1987) and Cotte and Wood (2004), respectively, exploring the 'inter' and 'intra' generational influences on consumer behaviour. This research into socialization has yet to explore how identification and deidentification with parents and siblings vary over the life course and how these identifications might influence shopping practices.

Second, the geographical literature mirrors marketing insights into the affective dimensions of consumer behaviour and the impact of human capital, by emphasizing shopping as a way of negotiating the self and the conflicting demands placed upon the individual (Zukin, 2005). Furthermore, Miller (1998) and Gregson et al (2002) argue that shopping is constitutive of social and spatial relations, rather than merely reflective of preordained roles and retail formats. Given that shoppers are reflexive about their practices in the act of shopping, one would presume that they are also reflexive about changes in shopping practices over longer periods of time. Nevertheless, few geographical life-course studies of consumption have been carried out; fewer still explore consumer reactions to retail format innovation. In a study of grocery shopping in Portsmouth, Clarke et al (2006) and Jackson et al (2006) reflect on a previous study of the human impact of supermarkets (Hallsworth, 1988), to examine how retail restructuring has impacted consumer choice. Clarke et al (2006) and Jackson et al (2006) both call for more studies of consumer choice that explore how retail developments influence shopping behaviour at the local level. Combining the intertemporal perspective with a spatial focus, the Portsmouth research was based upon an exit survey of shoppers combined with an at-home survey in selected areas (Clarke et al, 2006). The follow-up survey was augmented by a qualitative methodology that 'homed in' to produce an ethnography of shopper behaviour that took into account the domestic contexts of shoppers (Jackson et al, 2006). It is important to note that the Portsmouth study did not seek to survey the same shoppers that were part of the original survey in the early 1980s. Conceptually, our research explores the development of individual shoppers over the life course—stretching the rich contextualized work of Jackson et al (2006) over a much longer time period. First, we seek to trace the choices made by *individual shoppers* over the life course. Despite ground-breaking work by anthropologists and human geographers on the spatialities of individual shopping behaviour, this focus is seldom extended over the 'whole' life span of the individual (Gregson et al, 2002; Miller, 1998, page 164; Miller et al, 1998; Wrigley and Lowe, 1996, 2002; Zukin, 2005). Second, we seek to produce *thick descriptions* of shopping over time, which explore changes in shopping patterns with reference to specific individuals and the different historical contexts of family, household, and work in which their food consumption practices were embedded (Valentine, 1999). A thick description of

shopping, therefore, involves contextualizing historical observations of shoppers with reference to the practices and discourses that made sense of their actions in the past and the present (Geertz, 1973). In seeking to capture the subjective dimensions of consumer choice in these various contexts, our work complements emerging findings from the “Changing Families, Changing Food” research programme funded by the Leverhulme Trust (Smith, 2007).

Consumer reactions to self-service grocery shops and supermarkets in postwar Britain

The diffusion of self-service retailing in post-war Britain was temporally and spatially uneven, and the forms which these shops adopted were varied (du Gay, 2004; Lyon et al, 2004). The very first self-service grocery shops were developed in the late 1940s, principally by the Co-op. These shops were small in scale and occupied less than 1000 ft² (90 m²) (Shaw and Alexander, 2008). Small self-service shops, referred to as ‘mini-markets’ or ‘help-yourself’ shops by many UK shoppers, increased in number from an estimated 483 in 1950, to 7750 in 1960 (Henksmeier, 1960, page 16; Jefferys and Knee, 1962, page 106). According to the accepted definition of a ‘supermarket’ (see Rice, 1959), in 1950 there were an estimated 50 supermarkets in Britain (Birchall, 1994), rising to 367 in 1960 (McClelland, 1962, page 156), and 3400 in 1969 (*The Nielsen Researcher* 1970). In terms of market share, self-service (including supermarkets) accounted for an estimated 15% in 1959, rising to 64% in 1969 (*The Nielsen Researcher* 1970). It is important, therefore, to examine consumer reactions in light of a changing retail landscape of ‘traditional’ counter-service shops, home deliveries, street markets, small-scale self-service shops, and supermarkets (Bowlby, 1984).

The literature charting the adoption of self-service food and grocery retailing in the UK has yet to fully explore consumer reactions to this innovation. Bowlby (2000), drawing on contemporary market research from the 1960s and 1970s, examines the burgeoning relationships between consumers and brands associated with the rise of self-service food retailing. Alexander et al (2009) focus on the cocreation of self-service retailing and explore how consumers reacted to the proposition that they engage in altered patterns of value-creation activities as part of the switch from counter-service to self-service retail environments. Alexander et al (2008) meanwhile explore existing documentary material to show how women food shopper behaviours were influenced by notions of the ‘good housewife’. This last research reveals that, although there was a widespread conversion to using self-service retail formats in the 1960s, this conversion was partial and women reported a continued preference for counter-service formats for perishable foods. The explanation given is that women selectively adopted products from different retail formats to minimize the risk of failing to conform to societal and familial expectations that framed their domestic obligations and duties. The present paper differs from previous work in that it provides a new theoretical focus (ie the life-course approach) and utilizes new oral history data to explore the contexts in which shoppers negotiated their identities through adopting different retail formats and shopping practices.

The phenomenon of selective adoption has led us to adopt a basic typology to categorize consumer reactions to self-service grocery shops and supermarkets (Alexander et al, 2008; Goldman, 1982). First, the category of the *adopter* describes someone who transfers all of their food shopping to the self-service store or supermarket. This could describe the one-stop shopper, but could equally apply to someone using more than one self-service shop or supermarket. Second, the *nonadopter* describes someone who does not adopt self-service stores or supermarkets. Third, the *selective adopter* describes somebody who partially adopts self-service stores and supermarkets, but reserves a significant part of their food shopping for counter-service

shops, markets, and other types of retail outlet. During the period 1945–75 it was possible for shoppers to move in and out of these categories. The aim of this paper is to use the concept of the life course to explore the contexts in which shopping patterns emerged, focusing on shoppers predominantly characterized by more complete adoption of new retail formats, and those who are characterized by selective or nonadoption of self-service stores and supermarkets.

Life-course methodology

The concept of the life course was developed in the 1970s as a means of examining patterns of work and family organization (Hareven, 1978). In its broadest sense, life-course analysis is a synthesis of two different models which trace human activity over time. First, *developmental models* are typically based upon physiological and psychological stages that occur between birth and death. Second, *life-cycle models* function by examining the normative social stages through which individuals may pass. The notion of the life cycle has been criticized for ignoring individual human experiences and for focusing too closely on periods of stability rather than periods of transition (Hareven, 1978, page xiii). By contrast, the life-course model draws attention to the coordination of the different roles adopted by individuals and the synchronization or dislocation of the individual during periods of transition. In the absence of longitudinal data, recall methodologies are the only techniques available that provide access to historical information about changing perceptions, experiences, and behaviour. Despite the difficulties of remembering everyday practices, oral histories have the advantage of gathering historical evidence that addresses specific research questions and draws out the experiential dimension of shopping in rich contextual narratives (eg Elliott and Davies, 2006; Nell et al, 2009; Witkowski and Jones, 2006).

Research design and life-course methodology

The data presented in this paper were collected between July 2006 and February 2008 as part of the AHRC-funded project: “Reconstructing Consumer Landscapes: Shopper Reactions to the Supermarket in Early Post-war England c.1947–1975”. Biographical data was collected as part of a multimethod approach that combined a nationwide biographical shopping survey with oral histories. Respondents’ contributions are referenced as follows: oral history (OH) questionnaire response code number/sex/date of birth (eg OH/201/F/1935). If information is not available the field is replaced with a dash (–). In total, our convenient sample resulted in 1106 responses to the questionnaire, with 78 oral history interviews and 11 witness groups, involving 122 interview respondents in total. Female respondents outnumbered male respondents 96:26.

The biographical shopping survey was designed to collect basic biographical information (for example, date of birth, gender, marital status, occupation, housing tenure, and ethnicity) corresponding to three different time periods where appropriate. The respondents were then asked to provide answers to closed questions about their shopping habits for each time period. The periods were chosen to correspond broadly to the periods of rationing and relative austerity (1945–55), self-service expansion (1956–65), and more rapid supermarket development (1966–75). As we have already indicated, there was significant overlap in the development of self-service stores and supermarkets, which means that our periods are an approximation of general trends. At the end of the survey the respondent was presented with an open-ended question so that he or she could add more detail and comment on the experience of completing the survey. A selection of respondents who volunteered was then followed up in oral history interviews [for selection criteria see Nell et al (2009)].

The oral history interviews lasted anywhere between one and five hours, and were guided by a semistructured list of questions. The interviewer was permitted to be flexible in ordering the questions so that the interviews could be built around the respondents' more vivid memories and opinions. The survey methodology was not specifically designed to conduct life histories, but to shape oral histories around particular aspects of food shopping that addressed prior research questions about consumer reactions to retail innovation; for example, our desire to understand the motivations of adopters and nonadopters. Oral history is not identical to life history (oral history being more specific), but the two can display considerable overlap, especially when guided by research questions that span large periods of time. Our focus on life course emerged in three phases during the data collection and analysis.

First, our attention to the life course was driven by a number of respondents who situated their history of shopping in relation to broader temporal and social frames than we had envisaged at the design stage, providing more or less integrated approaches to the place of shopping in relation to other aspects of family, social, and professional life. To a greater or lesser extent, all respondents chose to relate stories of shopping to wider issues of life course. Reactions to attempts to refocus the interview upon shopping varied and depended upon what the respondent thought was important for the researcher and the interviewer's relationship with the respondent (Nell et al, 2009). A life-course focus was stimulated by the historical scope of the biographical survey. Interviewers used the survey data to provide a snapshot of each respondent's life course prior to the interview, which helped to structure questioning surrounding key life events in each period to assess their significance. In the oral histories that ensued, themes of mobility and retail format choice were interwoven with more personal narratives about friends and family. The contextual data might have been overlooked if a single methodology based around, for example, a survey instrument or the focus-group approach, had been used.

Second, when a number of interviews had been conducted, the interviewers began to recognize the importance of the life-course narratives to the project and actively solicited these perspectives. Third, and most critically, the notion of life course was identified at the stage of analysis, as it became evident that shopping was generally understood retrospectively in connection to a range of biographical stories. Theoretically, this requires some further comment on the construction of oral history and the treatment of these data at the stage of analysis and dissemination.

In conducting oral history work we are aware that "people plot their participation in consumer cultures in a way which perhaps exaggerates a distancing and reorients, rather than simply reports, the meaning of past actions" (Humphrey, 1998, page 202). Moreover, individuals reminisce about their past involvement in consumption cultures, at the point of being immersed within them. The analysis of oral history as historically contingent enables a critical approach to the construction of life stories as narratives (Atkinson, 1998). Lived human experience tends to be communicated self-referentially, in order to "create and maintain a sense of coherence, integrity and/or identity" (Cohler and Hostetler, 2004, page 556). Human experience is unique and can only be partially articulated by the individual. This partiality leads us to consider memories as complex registers of the past, in which past *events* are woven into life *stories*. Memories are constructed, but we also believe that oral history is corrigible and that memories are more or less accurate in terms of the recall of dates, times, events, places, and personal reactions. The accurate recall of events was facilitated in many cases by respondents' shopping archives (for example, old shopping lists, account books, and news cuttings), which were used to confirm the timing and placing of memories, even if these data

did not provide any explanatory power with respect to the interpretation of recalled emotions, beliefs and values.

Analytically, Dilthey (1976) and Bruner (1984) argue that we can overcome the limits bounding the articulation of individual experience through interpreting expressions, such as representations, texts, and performances. These expressions, although partial, are the encapsulations of the experience an individual has with others—in our case, other shoppers, family members, and retailers. Communication with these others takes place through the dialogical connection between experience and expression, and in so doing they mutually shape each other. Following Dilthey and Bruner, we can strive to make interpretations by working through these dialogical encounters in a circular fashion. As we interpret, through the formation of theory, we seek to identify common themes and narratives in the data. We argue in this paper that retail spaces and practices act as mnemonic pegs, which are unique to each individual. Exploring these retail memories illuminates the structures and personal agency that historically shaped the practices of shoppers within and beyond the spaces of the shop.

Theorizing using multiple case studies as methodological ‘ideal’ types, we have chosen to provide three case studies of individual shopper reactions that illustrate and contextualize the categories of adopter and nonadopter (Doty and Glick, 1994). Our aim is not to draw explanations about retail change from these case studies, but to contextualize existing explanations of self-service innovation that indicate the utility of this adoption classification (eg Alexander et al, 2008; Goldman, 1982). We now illustrate our contention that researching life transitions is vital to understanding shopper attachments to particular forms of retailing.

Adopting the supermarket: negotiating homemaking through the life course

Our first example is Doris (OH/573/F/1935), a lifetime resident of Abbey Wood in southeast London, who began work in 1950 as a junior secretary (figure 1). Her early shopping memories included shopping with, and for, her mother at the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, at Woolwich market, and at various other local counter-service shops. Doris described counter-service shopping as a social occasion and the queue as an opportunity for her mother to converse with friends and neighbours. This social intercourse involved Doris as a schoolgirl, but her exclusion from much of the adult conversation meant that she found the experience “frustrating”. Doris went on to marry the son of a grocery market stall holder in 1954, and had her first child a year

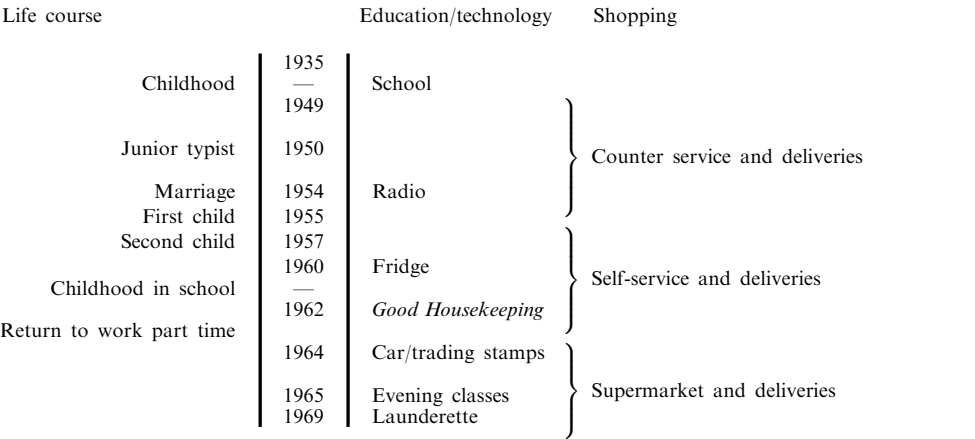


Figure 1. Life course for Doris, born 1935, C1 (lower middle class).

later, at which point she gave up her paid employment and became a full-time mother and housewife.

When she was first married, Doris continued to find queuing in counter-service shops frustrating. She also felt that older shopkeepers were condescending and treated her as if she knew nothing about the price, quantity, and quality of food she required. Moreover, she feared that if she bought something unusual or expensive, her mother would hear about it from the shop assistants the next day and disapprove. Doris, for example, identified a generational difference regarding the moral acceptability of abundant consumption:

"I was ready for change. I think most young housewives were ready for change. They'd sort of had so many shortages and seen shortages when their mother was doing the cooking and that sort of thing, that they were desperate to do something else ... I think there was a slight euphoria about shopping at that time because we'd been so short of food for so many years that suddenly if you saw something advertised that sounded a bit exotic you were there. That's it you'd got to try it."

For Doris counter-service food shopping was evaluated in relation to memories of austerity, the negative experience of personal service, and the communal scrutiny of purchases. Self-service was attractive because it gave her greater anonymity, freedom of choice (ie self-selection), and provided wider product ranges and deeper product lines.

Reflecting on her own mother in relation to supermarket shopping, she commented:

"She was scared. It scared her. The thought of it actually scared her, really. She wasn't ready for change and so many people weren't. They'd got used to struggling with everything through the war and I think they felt that they didn't want this change that was coming about. They wanted things to be really as they were."

This viewpoint is supported by the survey, *Shopping in Suburbia*, which assumed that younger people adopted self-service more readily because they had less to unlearn (J Walter Thompson, 1963). According to one newspaper correspondent:

"Among those that will not try it out, fear is the common cause. Some wonder, contemplating the first sally, whether they will be allowed to come out empty handed if they see nothing they want; others are afraid they will be charged with shop lifting goods they have previously bought elsewhere" (*The Times* 1959).

For Doris, however, a sense of wonder developed through her work with a small firm of London architects, which held the contract to design one of the first supermarkets for Sainsbury's in Lewisham in southeast London. Doris accompanied her employer to take notes as the building was erected and she was "amazed at how much shelf space was available". Similar to early self-service employees, who were reported to prefer self-service working conditions (CWS, 1949), Doris's perspective of self-service was positively influenced by the excitement of working on a pioneering project whose modernity promised a move away from the austerity of the war-torn economy. She recalled with enthusiasm that "I was amazed and I thought then, if I get the opportunity, I shall be shopping in one of these stores."

Despite the austerity of the early postwar shopping experience, however, counter service was valued by many housewives as a step out of the solitude of housework, which was described by contemporary feminists (de Beauvoir, 1972 [1949]; Friedan, 1963). Counter-service shops provided community functions, generating noneconomic values above and beyond market exchange, which for many shoppers offset the inconvenience of slow service, rigid opening hours, and the stocking of limited product lines (Alexander and Phillips, 2006; Landry et al, 2005). The sociability perceived by some shoppers in relation to the counter-service shops became less important for upwardly mobile women like Doris, for whom the workplace replaced the shop as a social forum.

For Doris grocery shopping only reasserted its social function once she had left waged employment to look after children in the home. She began using a small self-service shop in Plumstead following the birth of her first child (figure 1). Her weekly shop was a multitrip excursion involving what she estimated to be a six-mile round trip on foot with her neighbour. The visits were coordinated to coincide with regular visits to the health clinic to collect subsidized powdered infant formula milk.

Doris's shopping routine was disrupted on her return to work in the early 1960s. With the extra household income she purchased a car and began to use a Sainsbury's supermarket in Woolwich and sometimes would travel further to use Tesco in Welling. In the context of her domestic work and salaried employment, it was the product range that impressed Doris:

"when I did go back to work, that was when the supermarket was really handy, 'cos I just didn't have time to do the cooking, because before everything had to be made ..., everything had to be done from scratch. And you accepted it, that was what homemaking was about. But when you were at work you thought 'Can I have something quick?' So suddenly there were tins with pies already done in them ... and all sorts of convenience food. So you, you know, could certainly, you could certainly manage things a lot quicker once the supermarkets and self services came into being."

Doris was aware that the performance of homemaking had changed within her generation. Although the responsibility for managing the home was still normatively associated with women, it was permissible to sacrifice certain elements of homemaking because of the opportunity costs involved in food preparation 'from scratch' and the convenience of purchasing processed foods. However, Doris's comment reveals that her encounter with the supermarket had not erased a deep-seated belief that the duty of the homemaker was to invest time and effort in the preparation of food. Therefore, self-service introduced a 'small crisis' of identity linked to inherited norms of gendered homemaking practices.

Doris did not locate the socialization of homemaking norms within her own childhood home, but cited her mother-in-law as a domestic role model:

"She was actually an excellent cook and she could cook something from nothing ... she worked in the Woolwich Arsenal so she had to manage to go to work and still do all her shopping and her cooking. She managed it remarkably well. So I looked to her, she was an example. She was a very good example. More so than my own mother, in actual fact, because I think I would take instruction more from her than I would from Mother without arguing."

When Doris was married, it was her mother-in-law who provided her with basic cooking lessons. Budgeting was a key foundation of her instruction, which extended to price comparison in shops. When self-service retailers "started offering cheaper prices" in the early 1960s, this was an attractive value proposition for Doris who had been taught to emphasize thrift as the duty of the good homemaker.

The inculcation of a sense of duty linked to the homemaker role was represented in Doris's burgeoning interest in cookery. To make food preparation more interesting Doris took evening classes at a local school, where she augmented the basic culinary skills acquired from her mother-in-law to learn how to cook 'Indian' and 'Chinese' meals. She also recalled:

"I did used to listen to the radio, I used to listen to Women's Hour ... they used to have recipes and such like."

Doris's expanding culinary knowledge expanded her use of the supermarket where she could buy more exotic ingredients. Asked whether she used to purchase 'Continental' products in the 1960s, she replied that "if it had been advertised I would certainly have

tried it, that was for sure". It is difficult to establish the extent to which these activities constituted emotional compensation for the deskilling associated with the switch to purchasing convenience foods, but the timing of these activities following Doris's adoption of one-stop supermarket shopping indicates that they were linked to the maintenance of the homemaker role.

With respect to the infrastructure of homemaking, de Grazia (2005) argues that laundry and shopping were the most time-consuming tasks that were undertaken by women. Consequently we would expect that the modernization of laundry and shopping were vital in the overall modernization of domestic consumption, serving to 'release' women into other forms of concentrated labour and leisure. In 1969, a launderette opened, which enabled Doris to coordinate her laundry with top-up shopping:

"... you could go to the Launderette, put your washing in, nip round to the shops, do a bit of shopping, come back and your washing was ready to go in the dryer. So you know, it was, it just made such a difference to how you felt ... housewifery wasn't really a drudge anymore."

Doris is typical of many female respondents in our survey who negotiated the triple demands of homemaking, waged employment, and childcare. The enduring duty of homemaking is in tension with the sense of homemaking as a 'drudge', which supermarkets and other modern household equipment connected to food storage and preparation could relieve. For example, Doris purchased a fridge in 1960 so that she could prepare meals to eat later in the week when she had less time to prepare meals from scratch. She commented that "it was much more convenient", although it is interesting that the fridge did not impact on the frequency of her shopping visits. Bowlby (1984) concurs by citing evidence that women who switched to self-service shopping formats spent similar amounts of time shopping to those who continued to use counter-service formats.

During the 1970s Doris took advantage of the extended opening hours offered by supermarkets to conduct her main food shopping after work with her husband. Like many husbands whose wives perceived homemaking as their responsibility, his role was mainly limited to pushing the trolley, packing goods following payment, and selecting luxury or novel items. From the relatively pleasurable experience of walking to use self-service with her friend, Doris now perceived supermarket shopping by car as a chore to be completed as quickly as possible:

"Well, I suppose when I used to do the self-service shopping I went with a friend, so that was quite a laugh, you know, because we'd have a good gossip on the way there and a good gossip on the way back. So it wasn't at all a chore, not really. Later on when I went out to work and I used to meet Roy and we'd go in and do it ourselves. It was a question let's get this done and get home as quickly as we possibly can. So it wasn't what you'd call an enjoyable experience."

The 'one-shop' supermarket, therefore, was identified by Doris as alienating in two key respects. First, the time-space compression of a routine activity like grocery shopping narrowed the opportunities for social encounters and the development of relationships with other consumers. Second, the consumption of pre-processed packaged food, despite advantages associated with time saving, threatened her status as an authentic homemaker and removed some of the satisfaction accompanying food preparation from 'scratch'. In the transition to the 1970s and the uptake of supermarket shopping, the components that made 'housewifery' a 'drudge' had expanded to include grocery shopping. The ambiguity of the supermarket was a notable feature of Doris's narrative; it promised to relieve the burden of certain tasks but created new ones to be endured. She concluded her submission to the project by stating:

“Now I’m retired I loathe supermarket shopping and much prefer small independent butchers and delis, when I can find them. In other words, I’ve turned into my mother!”

From her deidentification with her mother’s counter-service shopping in the early postwar period, Doris had reidentified at a later period, valuing counter service for specialist perishable foods. In summary, Doris illustrates the transition made by many working women, whose choice of self-service and the supermarket was directed by dissatisfaction with ‘traditional’ retail formats and the need for more efficient means of shopping. For many of the women we interviewed this transition was made at the point of marriage; for others it was the onset of parenthood. In each case it depended on the location and accessibility of self-service shops and the domestic time budgets of the household in question.

Nonadoption and selective adoption: family, food cultures, and retail format choice

Turning to examine the relationship between family food cultures and format choice, we can explore further how values constructed through family life are interconnected with shopping. In this section we present two differing cases, which together can be considered as instances of ‘nonadoption’. In our first example we pay careful attention to the construction of the oral history narrative and the researcher’s field notes from the interview.

Doreen’s story

Doreen (OH/30/F/1923) was born in 1923 in Shoreham-by-Sea (figure 2). Doreen’s example is unusual within our convenient sample, because of her political consciousness about the impact of supermarkets (Nell et al, 2009). Doreen was a selective adopter of self-service retail formats in the period from the early 1950s to 1973, at which point she became a nonadopter of self-service formats for various reasons. During the construction of her oral history, Doreen was keen to point out that, although she used self-service shops, she had never used supermarkets until recently.

Her explanations for her nonadoption of supermarkets included concern about environmental effects, labour-market instability, rural aesthetics, food security, communal solidarity, and a sense of place-based belonging. These explanations are typical of current critiques of supermarket retailing, yet Doreen was able to connect these narratives to practices she encountered in the parental home in which she lived for the first fifty years of her life. The oral history she co-constructed with the researcher can be interpreted as a series of binary representations, in which counter-service

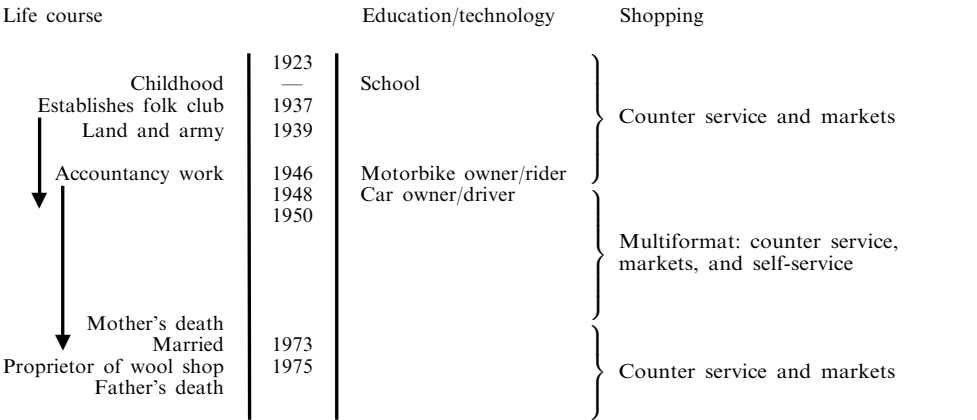


Figure 2. Life course for Doreen, born 1923, C1 (lower middle class).

shops are identified as the privileged term within a wider discursive framework which contrasts redemptive and contaminant sequences (McAdams et al, 2001). A "contaminant sequence involves the move from a good, affectively positive life scene to a bad, affectively negative scene" (McAdams et al, 2001, page 474). Contamination sequences are present in a wide variety of narratives, but all of them have in common the sense that something positive has been irrevocably spoiled or ruined (Tomkins, 1987). Supermarkets enter Doreen's narrative as a contaminant, reflecting her sense of self-identity and the cultural influences in which her life is situated. For example, in relation to the theme of respect for others, a theme which Doreen raised, the counter-service shop was portrayed as a place of friendliness. The coming of the supermarket represents a contaminant sequence. Doreen stated:

"I think it's a shame because when they came [ie supermarkets] it was barge here and barge there and 'I want this' and you'd lean over and get anything, and I think it's wrong."

Similarly, Doreen connected the retail environment of home delivery and smaller counter service stores, and thus, for her, more frequent food shopping, with practices of more sustainable consumption (redemptive sequence). Doreen commented

"I can't remember my mother, I can't remember myself ever throwing food away, because if it's fresh and you cook only the amount you want, you don't have any waste."

In contrast, the supermarket again was part of a contaminant sequence in Doreen's narrative. She told us

"[the coming of the supermarket] was the worst thing that ever happened, that is why we've got so much recycling stuff, because they have everything in packets, and things inside packets ..."

A life-course perspective is essential to make sense of Doreen's selective adoption of self-service and her nonadoption of supermarkets. During the rise of supermarkets she lived at home with her parents and was not responsible for food preparation or the majority of food procurement for the home. Consequently, her domestic time budgets were relatively stable, providing her with flexibility over a long period of time. In the 1950s and 1960s she worked as an accountant in Brighton and used a small self-service Tesco store if her parents needed additional groceries. Doreen's oral history demonstrates a strong identification with her parents' attitudes and behaviour (Cotte and Wood, 2004). Until the early 1970s her parents were mainly self-sufficient, growing their own vegetables and keeping poultry in the back garden:

"he had a lot of ground and so she never really sort of bought vegetables from anybody at all and so she wouldn't have gone to any big shop, not at all, not for anything, not like Marks and Spencer's, there was a Marks and Spencer's but she wouldn't dream of, well I wouldn't."

It was evident that for Doreen the provenance of this food was inextricable from other evaluations. For example, in terms of flavour and quality, the produce Doreen encountered as a young person provided her with a benchmark against which she subsequently judged the performance of supermarket food:

"even the chickens, the eggs, don't taste the same."

Our interpretation is that purchasing convenience foods symbolized an implied criticism of the skill and care provided by Doreen's parents. Moreover, she believed that the impersonal transaction effected by supermarkets was itself symbolic of other changes associated with postwar modernization. For example, she commented:

"You don't get a man raising his cap to say 'Good morning', you don't get a man get up off a seat to let a lady sit down, no manners whatsoever and it's all started I'm sure, a lot of it, through these supermarkets ..."

Doreen’s perception was that retail modernization had contributed to the destruction of cycles of reciprocal altruism, which had once been maintained by a combination of counter-service retail, religious institutions, and a less instrumental education system—all of which fostered intimate human contact. Into a narrative about food shopping, therefore, Doreen wove stories about the value of personal contact: Sunday school education; nursing her aging parents; providing care for her nephews and nieces following the death of her sister-in-law; running her own wool shop as a communal gathering point in later life; teaching weaving in her home; and running folk societies. Doreen’s reaction to retail format innovation, therefore, is inseparable from wider institutional life in which a particular construction of the ‘home’ is considered to be the foundation of an integral way of life based upon an ethic of care for the other.

Doreen married in 1973 (aged fifty) and continued the pattern of home gardening and shopping conducted by her parents:

“I used to buy boxes of fruit from Brighton market because I made all my own jam and marmalade ... and we had our own local butchers ... and he would deliver as well ... we had the dairy ... the vegetable shops ... there was a Co-op bakery in Hove and so they used to deliver the bread ... and also we used to go to this local bread shop ... [and] towards Arundel there was a self-pick and ... we’d pick up the potatoes and take those home and I would cut a lot of them, peel them and ... chip them in half, just half boil and then freeze them.”

For Doreen homemaking involved shopping in counter-service shops, nurturing relationships with small-scale retailers, and preserving a cultural lifestyle venerated by her parents. Now widowed, however, she still cooks a meal each day from fresh ingredients, but relies upon a greater number of processed foods purchased from supermarkets. A factor in her acquiescence to supermarkets is her increasing frailty, but also the lack of performative contexts in which her culinary skill is appreciated by family members. In the case of Doreen, even though culinary habits and critical politics persist, retail choices changed throughout the life course as the connection between food and family changed.

David’s Story

David (OH/692/M/1938), the son of an engineer, was born in Portsmouth (figure 3). His mother shopped in a range of small counter-service shops for food in Portsmouth, continuing the practice after the family moved to Bradford in 1949. David recalled that the opening of Morrisons’ first supermarket in the old Victoria Cinema in Bradford

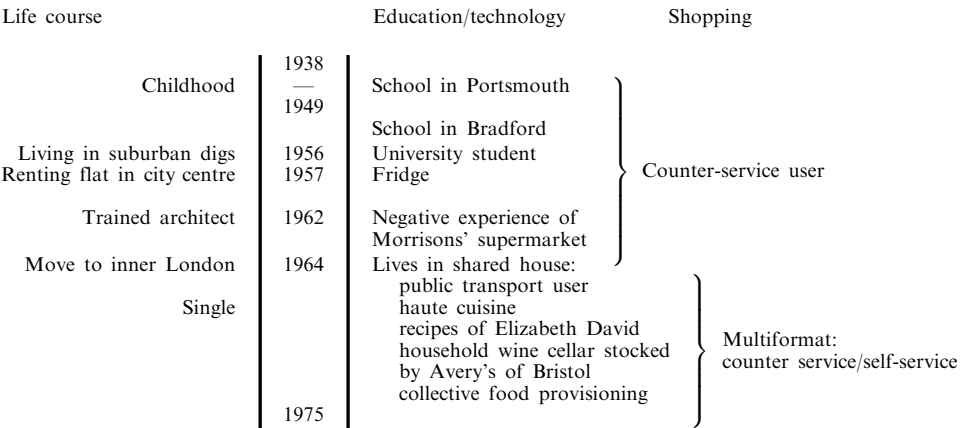


Figure 3. Life course for David, born 1938, A (upper middle class).

had created “a lot of interest” in 1961. However, he went on to say:

“I think we must have been a bit sniffy about it to say the least, because my mother’s perception of it was that it was, that it was poor quality, and to what extent that was because you didn’t get the service or she didn’t get, the standard of meat or potatoes or whatever, I don’t know, but we didn’t go there. Nor did we go to the Co-op—she was fairly sniffy about the, the divvy, the dividend tick.”

Although David was unable to explain why his mother was ‘sniffy’, it is clear that supermarkets were regarded as undesirable by some middle-class shoppers.

In the 1950s David left home to train as an architect. Living in digs, he continued the food shopping practices followed by his mother, using small counter-service shops to purchase the ingredients for plain meals of ‘meat and two veg’. In 1962 he moved to the suburbs of south London, and after eighteen months there, moved into a private architectural practice and lived in shared accommodation near Grays Inn. It was in central London that food became a marker of status that was symbolic of David’s rising aspirations. He lived with a doctor who was the secretary of the hospital wine club and who introduced him to Elizabeth David’s (1950) *Mediterranean Food* and the recipes of Robert Carrier. Despite his growing gastronomic tastes and an inherited dislike for supermarkets, indicated by his mother’s ‘sniffy’ attitude, he described his own nonadoption as pragmatic:

“you never know whether you’re eating out next day or you’ve got ten friends coming um so life isn’t predictable in a way that, um, it is later in life when you might have, um, er, when, when you’re stuck because you’re working and your children are at school and you know there is a routine and you know how many are for dinner.”

For David supermarkets proved to be an inflexible retail format for a single lifestyle that needed to be responsive to fluid social arrangements. Today, David still lives in Central London and shops using an Internet supermarket delivery service and a London market for fresh produce. According to him:

“owning a car is more problem than it’s worth and we haven’t had one for some time. So, to some extent it’s full circle, the criteria that meant we shopped locally in the 50s now apply here for quite different reasons, even though there are supermarkets that we could go to.”

Devine (2005) notes that food choice tends to form stable trajectories over a person’s life. Food choice trajectories are considered to be cumulative, insomuch as “they develop over a lifetime, incorporating people’s meaningful experiences with food and eating” (page 122). Both Doreen and David illustrate that food choice trajectories are connected with shopping patterns over the life course. Major turning points in each life story can be identified, alongside relatively stable shopping trajectories. David’s case highlights that, although parental influences continue to shape shopping patterns throughout the life course, other social factors may overlay these experiences to strengthen existing shopping patterns. David’s social life was and is closely connected with the selection of food and the convenience of the retail format. As the variety of his diet broadened, counter-services shops were able to provide for his requirements, and it was only as supermarkets began to innovate, using the Internet, that David considered them as an option. Family influences appear to be greater in Doreen’s nonadoption of supermarkets, which was more ideologically framed, than in David’s case, by the contaminant narrative. The importance of historical family food cultures in Doreen’s case was interwoven with a clear political stance against the perceived negative influence of supermarkets upon a venerated way of life. However, as Doreen experienced a major change in family life (bereavement), the supermarket eventually gained her selective custom.

Conclusion

In this paper we set out to examine the historical development of individual shoppers, paying particular attention to their reactions to retail format innovations. Our aim was to go beyond the static snapshots provided by contemporary surveys of consumer reactions to self-service and the supermarket, which are dominated by the rationalities of the marketing mix: that is, product, place, price, and promotion. Our research, therefore, pays more attention to the social and cultural networks, routines, norms, and emotions that shape consumer reactions to the different retail offerings of counter service, self-service, and the supermarket.

In order to understand the historical development of shoppers successfully, it is vital to interpret shopping data in the dynamic contexts of the life course. The concept of the life course is flexible enough to provide a framework in which consumer decision making can be understood *in relation* to the wider contexts of an individual's 'whole' life. The life-course perspective provides the scope to trace the impact of periods of transition and stability on consumer decision making. Examining consumer decision making in the context of personal biography facilitates a much deeper understanding of why consumers reacted to self-service and the supermarket in different ways. In our three examples life-changing events, such as beginning university education, work relocation, bereavement, marriage, and childbirth, all feature as important factors that impacted on the choice of retail format. These events, and reactions to these events, were framed by the degree to which shoppers identified with parents, and internalized normative constructs associated with household reproduction and a range of other institutions.

None of our examples fits neatly into the three typologies of adopter, selective adopter, and nonadopter across the whole time period 1945–75. Looking beyond 1975 it is interesting to note how adopters of the supermarket could revert to forms of selective adoption, and how selective adopters could move towards more wholesale adoption of supermarkets. Our adopter case study, Doris, moved from counter service to self-service and then to the supermarket during 1945 to 1975, with these transitions corresponding to changes in her role vis-à-vis waged employment and child rearing. In this respect, Doris typifies many women in full or part-time employment within our convenient sample of shoppers. Doris chose the supermarket for its convenience, over any consideration of personal service. Our main nonadopter case study, Doreen, apparently developed an early understanding of the political dimensions of retail modernization. The interconnected values and the provisioning practices nurtured in the family home provided the touchstone for Doreen's negative evaluation of the supermarket format. As a top-up shop self-service formats were tolerated, but they would never be able to replace the personal service that Doreen valued more highly than convenience. Finally, David illustrates how negative parental judgments about early supermarkets were perceived to have had relatively little impact on their progeny's consumer behaviour, despite David's reproduction of familial patterns of shopping. In David's case the location of self-service and supermarket formats meant it was impractical to adopt them, even though there was no *prima facie* objection to this form of shopping.

Unlike other historical research methodologies, oral history provides critical purchase on the role of emotions and consumer psychology in retail format choice. Some respondents, such as Doris, appeared to be more reflective than others about their past consumption activity and to engage in deconstructing or finessing their own narrative in the process of narrating. For Doreen, on the other hand, oral history provides an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with changes experienced over the life course, but also an opportunity to express a political commentary on that experience.

When personal identity is so closely bound up with political critique, it is imperative that we view this critique in the context of the life course alongside other experiences and events. In doing so, we are able to understand how retail change is bound up with the construction of the self vis-à-vis the perceived responsibilities and entitlements of particular socially available roles; for example, the different gendered constructions of the homemaker.

The rise of self-service and supermarket formats are related, but they should be seen as offering very different services to shoppers, dependent on perceived differences of location, accessibility, utility, and size. For example, some working women evaluated supermarkets principally on their capacity to replace domestic labour through the provision of convenience foods—which meant that the product range was all important. For others convenience was about the speed at which shopping could be completed in store, or the way in which food shopping could be combined with other essential activities. Again in these respects self-service and the supermarket had the potential to offer very different services, because shoppers operated with different time budgets and values with respect to household organisation. Moreover, we should not think of self-service as necessarily an impersonal format. When shoppers' domestic time budgets allowed, they were able to create new forms of sociability through self-service shops. This alerts us to the need to contextualize accounts that represent a golden age of 'traditional counter-service shops' or 'supermarket convenience' and think more carefully about the different forms of sociability that were fostered by different retail formats.

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